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The Vines' Craig Nicholls

GARAGE- ROCK SAVANT

**IS THE VINES' CRAIG NICHOLLS
CRAZY LIKE A FOX, OR JUST
PLAIN CRAZY?**

The Vines could be the saviors of guitar rock, or they could be over by the time you read this. Either way, it will probably remain a mystery whether frontman Craig Nicholls was/is the latest in a long line of rock and roll lunatics, or was/is playing a role to generate publicity and build his own myth. But whatever Nicholls nuggets materialize in the tabloid news, guitarists should thank the Vines for being a high-profile, platinum-selling band that adores the sound of guitars, and for releasing *Winning Days* [Capitol]—an album of great

BY MICHAEL MOLEND



Head-in-the-clouds guitarist Craig
Nicholls (left) and feet-on-the-
ground bassist Patrick Matthews.



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songs, aggro-yet-musical guitar tones, and passionate vocals. It's only when attempting to document the Vines' creative process that Nicholls' "persona" gets in the way. He is extremely sweet, unpretentious, and well mannered, but he also tends to answer questions in his chosen native tongue—which is Australian Screwball.

So what do you do when a band's guitarist is loathe to reveal any musical clues? You query the bass player. (Vines co-guitarist Ryan Griffiths never speaks to the press.) In this interview, we'll visit with Nicholls in his zone, and then move to a sidebar detailing the more grounded insights of bassist Patrick Matthews. Between the two perceptual angles, you should get a good peek into the architecture of one of the new generation's premier guitar-pop bands.

Are you still using your Strat?

No. I now have a custom-made guitar. No. I now have a custom-made guitar. It's smaller and lighter than the Strat, and I think it sounds better. I'm not sure who made it, but he's a very nice person and I'm very grateful to him.

What about amps and effects?

I have a Sunn and a Marshall, but I mostly use the Marshall. For effects, I have a tremolo pedal, and I really like this one called a flanger.

Any preference for strings?

I definitely think strings are a good idea, because I couldn't make much sound without them [laughs]. I put about six of them on, and I tune to anything in the air—it doesn't have to be tied down.

After all the critical acclaim for your last record, *Highly Evolved*, did you start the sessions for *Winning Days* with any specific goals?

We just wanted to get it finished and make sure we remembered to put all the parts on it. I hope we made a good album, and that people like it, but we can't really change what we are.

Do you care about crafting tones at all, or do you just follow your instincts?

Well, we're lucky to have people who help us with the technical side in the studio.

But I did have a vision for each song. We kept things pretty simple, because we realized that simple things sound good on the guitar, but we also wanted to exaggerate everything for maximum impact. Discovering the weird little sounds that make an impact is what drives us. I'd say things like, "This needs to be more spacey," or "It's not dirty enough." We just try to let things happen and not freak out and lose it.

Can you be more specific about your definition of "impact?"

It has to do with the extremes you can take a song to. The fact is, there are no rules, and we're not afraid to try anything. You have your imagination, and that can mean anything goes. It's a good feeling when you see a song really come to life in the studio. I'm trying to describe this the best I can, but I'm always tying my head in knots.

Guitar-wise, what is the thing you're most proud of on *Winning Days*?

It's the one-note guitar solo on "Amnesia." It sounds like a freight train, but it's just one little high note.

You don't seem to like admitting this, but I've heard you're the boss in the studio—as far as parts and sounds go.

We all do our part, but I guess my part is writing most of the words and the melodies. The other guys write stuff, as well, but I'm *obsessed* by it. They'll give me input, and we'll change our minds, or we'll have a big argument and say we're going to break up [laughs].

You're obviously a very pure creator, but you're also signed to a major label and are expected to sell albums. How does that commercial pressure affect your approach to music making?

Are major labels evil? I haven't figured that out yet. We just have to be happy with what we're doing, and I don't think there's anything wrong with being on the charts. Also, we signed our deal as we were mixing our first album, so when Capitol stepped in, it was clear they wouldn't be able to change us. [Laughs.] I'm getting a bit pretentious! It's hard to talk about this stuff, because you never know how people are going to react to your work. ■

WHAT THE BASS PLAYER KNOWS...

Craig Nicholls loves to conceal the mysteries of creation, so thank goodness bassist Patrick Matthews is a tad more open. Here are a few tiny revelations about what goes on inside a Vines session. —MM

"Craig always focuses on that little sort of half-moment when he's changing chords and his fingers are off the strings," says Matthews. "He often uses that brief open sound as a musical device. 'Winning Days,' for example, is all about the space when the guitar goes from F to C. Craig doesn't think technically about chords, notes, and scales, but he listens to what the guitar is saying at all times.

"He likes the bass and guitar to start on the same chord, so it's pretty hard to get away with playing some funny bass notes. I try to fit in between Craig's offensively trebly tone and Ryan's [co-guitarist Griffiths] low burrow-y sound. I like a low rumble without much actual tone, but, basically, I just want to be heard! For us, making a record can be so unbelievably dumb!"